

Self-Loading Luggage



by Capt. Randolph L. Winge, USAF

No one expects to have a “There I was...” story early in his or her flying career. Those tales are for the crusty old codgers with thousands of hours under their belts, who, for the price of a drink at the club, will pass on their wealth of knowledge to the next generation of flyers. Nonetheless, there I was, a nugget weapon systems officer (WSO) in the F-111 replacement training unit with just such a story.

It was my second training flight in the venerable Aardvark. My pilot, an experienced instructor, briefed the mission to be a local low-level dumping into Melrose Bombing Range for target familiarization, followed by multiple approaches to home field. Because it was my second flight in the Vark, the pilot spent extra time covering crew coordination, ORM issues, and his expectations of me as his WSO. The two-hour, low-level went as briefed, and we soon were back in the traffic pattern overhead Cannon AFB, N.M. During the eleventh lap in the pattern, I cried uncle, and the pilot agreed to make the next approach the last. Little did I know at the time how prophetic he was.

For the final go, we departed the pattern to re-enter for a 5-G, approach-end break. Everything went textbook perfect. About 90 degrees into the turn, the pilot made one of the four comments that right-seaters never want to hear from their pilots. He said, “Uh oh.” As I scanned the instruments to determine what was wrong, I discovered we had lost a generator, a common enough problem in the Vark. “It happens a lot,” he explained. “Normally we would declare an emergency, but we’ll just continue to a

full-stop.” Prepared by a dozen emergency-simulator rides, I immediately reached for my checklist. By the time I found the right page and just about the time we rolled out on final, I heard the second, third and fourth phrases that right-seaters never want to hear, “Oh ...,” followed by an ever popular four-letter expletive, followed by, “We’re not going to make it,” and finally, “Bail out, buh...”

I’m pretty sure he had intended to say it three times, but all power cuts out when the capsule ejects from an F-111. I distinctly remember seeing the horizon roll three times before coming to rest and seeing the burning wreckage of our jet 50 feet in front of us. We were OK, but what had happened?

We had lost an engine because of a fuel-pump blockage as we rolled off the perch. Both throttles were cut to idle until we were established on final, and the sink rate was too high for a single engine to overcome. The only glaring indication of the problem was the loss of a generator. Had we rolled wings level after losing the generator, we might have saved the jet. The pilot’s decision to take it to a full stop was a result of overconfidence (he had seen this problem many times before). My inexperience didn’t help matters.

Six years and 1,000 flight hours later, I look back and am amazed at what he and I did. If I had just taken the time to finish my scan of the instruments, would I have seen the indications of a failed engine? Why had I put so much faith in my pilot’s knowledge of the platform, rather than working out the problem for myself? Was I just self-loading luggage? A passenger in a crew position?

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